

The Museum of Anthropology at the Sapienza University, Rome

Silvia Soncin, Maria Luana Belli, Giorgio Manzi

Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto
Publio Terenzio Afro, 165 a.C.

“Man” is surely a fascinating matter to discuss and everything but easy to deal with. Suggested by the etymology of the word itself, anthropology is the science devoted to the study of humans as natural bio-cultural beings, were there is an implicit and pernicious correspondence between “narrator” and “narration” (Bruner, 2006). As a matter of fact, the history of anthropology met several controversies. In fact, past anthropologists were influenced by the general cultural background, manipulated by the social atmospheres and political parties of their time. This depended to the country in which this discipline developed, or vice versa the anthropologists themselves and their science influenced the common believes (Spedini, 2005). The museum of anthropology “Giuseppe Sergi” is witness of the complex history of physical anthropology in Italy, particularly in Rome, through the past two centuries. Today, this museum represents an ideal example when dealing with the study on the humankind.

Anthropological museology

The difficulty in approaching anthropology is particularly felt in the museology field, and can be more deeply evaluated with respect to three main obstacles, particularly true for the Italian climate, which are in brief as follows. The first barrier concerns the denomination of this science. Exactly, what does anthropology mean? Obviously, it indicates a “speech about the human being”, but no other expression has ever had so many interpretations. The extent of elements hovering around humans resulted, in Italy, in two main fields of anthropological research,

that unfortunately lack of communication meanings: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology (Manzi, 2006). Physical anthropology, from a naturalistic bedrock, is a science and, for this reason, it has a methodological approach based on measurability and reproducibility of data acquired studying human remains, foremost skeletal. Physical anthropologists are interested in all of us as living creatures: our biological characteristics and how these evolved through time. Cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, analyse the social and economic sphere of ancient and contemporary human populations, including their perceptive, ideological, lore and religious aspects. This discrepancy appears to emerge when museums exposing.

In Italy, there are museums of “Ethnography and Anthropology”, collecting the “[...] materials related to cultures and characteristics of human populations, including the documentations of oral testimonies and of events and rituals [...]” (ISTAT, 2016, our translation), while skeletal materials are generally included in archaeological or natural science museums. By doing so, we risk to lose that

“Homo-centricity” that the word “Anthropology” itself implies. The skeletal remain risks to be let undressed from its innate meaning of human being. Nevertheless, it is clear that the reason why our species, *Homo sapiens*, had been able to spread all over the world becoming the unique extant species of our genus is mostly due to its extraordinary behavioral and cultural capabilities, while it is also evident how these aspects are closely connected to morphological and physiological adaptations. Thus, today, these two disciplines should work together with synergy on the study, the divulgation, conservation and exhibition of the history of the human being, starting from its origin to contemporary human groups, contextualizing the



Figure 1 - The original disposition of the museum collections at the Collegio Romano in the center of Rome until 1937. (MAN@ur1 archive)

mechanisms of biological adaptation to the cultural and environmental phenomena that triggered them.

A second obstacle that interposes into the museology of anthropological skeletal remains, arises from ethical issues (Turner, 2005). These are the results of that awareness, that is to handle even before than an archaeological find or than a scientific tool, the remains of a human being. The problem boasts a very intense and argued global recent history. How can visitors embrace the musealisation of human remains? We should consider two aspects. The first concerns the personal evolutionary history of each visitor. This may lead the individual to wonder and react looking at a musealised remain, indisputably linked to the sphere of death, with angst, peeve, repulsion or with curiosity and attraction for the access into a dimension that, for several reasons, remains barely understandable; the second one is related to the reaction modalities of a group of individuals, sharing the same religious beliefs, or, more generally, belonging to the same cultural group, and this again may drive them to forward requests that are certainly licit but often in contrast with study and museology needs. The International Council of Museums (ICOM), in the *Code of Ethics for Museums*, inserted human remains in a special category denominated “culturally sensitive material”, in order to cope with these communication difficulties and to avoid any lesion to the ethic and sensibility of each individual or of cultural groups. This is considered the deontological document of principles shared by the international museums community. The Code also rules how to preserve, study and expose such materials showing respect to “[...] the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated [...]” (ICOM, 2009). The publication of the document was necessary due to those tenacious requests of repatriation demanded by indigenous populations from United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand that laid claim to their cultural identities, during the last decades in the last century. Nowadays, these requests are extended also to historical and scientific collection belonging to occidental museums, including the Italian ones. It is worth to be mentioned the request of repatriation pretended by the Australian Government of some skeletal remains conserved by the Anthropological Section of the Natural History Museum in the University of Florence, Italy. The trial concluded with the publication of a document aiming at “[...] establishing a constructive discussion among the various parties in-

involved and particularly with the Australian indigenous communities for a correct interpretation and use of these collections and of their meaning [...]” (Joint Committee ANMS/AAI, 2011). This document was inspired by that “collaborative museology” that has been proved successful in the United States and in Canada. However, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss about repatriation (for more details, see for instance: Giacobini, 2011; Pinna, 2011; Monza, 2014).

Then, there is an additional element laying at the basis of anthropological musealisation in Italy. Italian anthropological museums are a historical stratigraphy and today they exhibit the results and the tools of their study, research and, often, the extravagancies of those protagonists that orbited around these museums. They emerged, in fact, some more than others, in conjunction with the birth of physical anthropology, typically from the academic world, in the midst of the Positivistic feeling of the late XIX and of the early XX centuries. When a director decides to adapt its anthropological museum toward the new adjustments in respect of each individual and of communities and toward a new dialogue with cultural anthropology, it will result extremely difficult to realize an exhibition project that is both mature and aware and that does not betray the stratigraphy of the museum. However, why should it be kept? The reason is intuitive and mostly embraceable: considering the historical significance of these museums, this adaptation has the same importance of a real restoration. It consists in a cleaning that must respect the museum communication needs. Cesare Brandi, author of the Italian restoration milestone *Theory of Restoration*,

warns: to re-establish a defective unity, it is possible but only when it is done “[...] without committing an imitation or a historical forgery, and without excluding the art work passage, through the time phases.” (Brandi, 1963, our translation). Most of the readers surely know that Brandi refers to the major arts, and in particular to the painting. However, if we consider our anthropological museum as an empty container (material as *structure*) that in a specific timeline (time as *duration*), the scientists and directors (*author*) decided to fill it in, by making it a vehicle for a unique message (material as *aspect*), here is when the protection of the elements carrying the passage becomes not only respectable but also right and proper.

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A museum in Rome (until 1950)

In this context, we introduce the Museum of Anthropol-

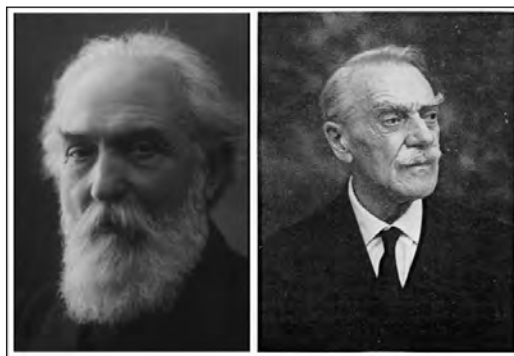


Figure 2 - Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936), on the left, and Sergio Sergi (1878-1972) typified large part of the history of physical anthropology in Rome. (MAN@ur1 archive)

logy “Giuseppe Sergi” of the Sapienza University of Rome, tracing back its history from the origins in the second half of XIX century.

Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936) was born in Messina, Sicily. Moved by a passionate spirit, he was close to philosophy from an early age thanks to the autodidact study of ancient greek and sanskrit. His dedication to the discipline oriented him to the philosophy he was teaching at high schools. His sharpness of thoughts was soon recognized and he was convened to fulfill the chair of Theoretic Philosophy at the Scientific Academic of Milan and, later, of Anthropology at the University of Bologna. In the middle of the Positivism in which the modern evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin and the birth of psychology with Sigmund Freud stood out, the passionate philosopher Giuseppe Sergi pledged himself to the best interpretation of the human mind, to which he always referred as inhabiting the brain and as enclosed by the cranium.

In 1884 he obtained the chair of Physical Anthropology at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, at the Science faculty, and dedicated his academic career, with an intent almost reductionist (Manzi, 1987), to the naturalistic study of human variability through time. From this moment onwards, at the basis of his wide research activity there was a forward-looking awareness: “[man is an animal] for the nature in which he lives and from which he derives [...]” (Sergi S., 1937, p. 14, our translation), that is to say that the knowing of man is possible only studying its physiological development over time and its interaction with the environment, following the French interpretation of anthropology as *Histoire Naturelle de l’Homme*, introduced by Buffon in the late XVIII century. At “La Sapienza”, Sergi founded the Museum, the first Experimental Psychology Laboratory (1889) and the Roman Society of Anthropology (1893) that is named today Italian Institute of Anthropology. He was close to Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and to his school, and he was member of the Society of Anthropology directed by Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), but from which he departed in 1893

just when he was publishing a new proposal of classification of the human races (Sergi S., 1937).

Thousands of materials had been acquired by or donated to Giuseppe Sergi in that period of vibrant research. At that time, the primal core of the museum was in the ancient chapel of San Pietro in Vincoli church, at the Regia Scuola di Applicazione per Ingegneri (School of Engineering). It was then moved in 1887, together with the institute, on the ground floor of Palazzo del Collegio Romano, where it remained until 1938. The disposition of the collections was quite suggestive. All we

know of this disposition is due to the oral tradition and to an old photography which captures the principal gallery, suspended in time, wore of massive timber cabinets hosting neatly the craniological collections (Figure 1).

Giuseppe Sergi dedicated himself to the study of the skull shape and of human species and human races, reconsidering the fundamentals of craniology. He studied psychology, analysing times and ways of sensorial perception both on healthy and infirm individuals. His purpose was to find a conjunction between skull shape and psychology, following the Lombrosian principles of criminal anthropology.

In 1878, when he was still teaching philosophy at high schools in Messina, Giuseppe Sergi witnessed to the birth of his son, Sergio Sergi (1878-1972), the future protagonist of the museum (Figure 2). The paternal education influenced him deeply, developing a scientific program on it. Sergio Sergi graduated in Medicine at “La Sapienza” with the final dissertation dedicated to the physiology of cerebellum. It is the first evidence of

his passionate interest for the study of psychology on physiological basis. He continued with his academic formation in Berlin, coming back in Rome enrolled from 1909 to 1924 as Head Doctor at the psychiatric hospital “Santa Maria della Pietà”. This role allowed him to realize a research programme with the aim to study the morphology and psycho-physiology of human nervous system. Actually, the improvement and the introduction of new scientific tools for the measure of skull is due to Ser-



Figure 3 - Pencil marks left on specimens preserved at the museum aimed to follow the cranial profile with the S. Sergi’s “pantogoniostato”. (MAN@ur1 archive; photo Emiliano Bruner)



Figure 4 - The turning point of the anthropological research in Rome: the Neanderthal fossil specimens from Saccopastore. (MAN@ur1 archive; photo Paolo Ragazzini)

gio Sergi himself, laying the foundations, although pioneering, of the current Geometric Morphometrics. Among these, they are worth to be mentioned the “*pantogonistato craniosteofo-ro*”, which allows to provide a space position to the skull or any other bone, referred to the plane on which it is oriented (Figure 3). In 1916, Giuseppe Sergi retired from the chair of Anthropology and his son succeeded, in 1925, becoming Tenured Professor.

It was 1929 when, almost unexpectedly, the research of Sergio Sergi experienced a variation in direction. It was precisely 13th May and the Duke Mario Grazioli went to the institute to show him an extraordinary and mysterious discovery. It was the first Neanderthal cranium recovered in a quarry in Via Nomentana, nearby the meander of Aniene river, denominated, from the name of the locality, Saccopastore 1. Six years later, a second Neanderthal cranium was consigned to Sergio Sergi, recovered from the same quarry and called Saccopastore 2 (Figure 4). But the lucky discoveries did not end there. It was in 1939 when the Neanderthal remains, now known as Guattari 1 (cranium) and Guattari 2 (mandible), were discovered in a sea-cave on the promontory of San Felice Circeo, between Rome and Naples, and in 1950 when the mandible Guattari 3 emerged. The attention of Sergio Sergi was definitely addressed to palaeoanthropology. He applied for fossil remains the same rigorous approach before applied on living individuals or on human contemporary crania (Ascenzi, 1974).

In the meantime, in 1938, as already mentioned, the museum was transferred in the newly university campus of “La Sapienza”, in the building still denominated “Anthropology and Psychology”, in viale Regina Elena. The area assigned to the museum is up today located on the second floor of the building and covers a very wide surface. All the collections were organised trying to propose the same arrangement of the previous location, with massive cabinets on the sides of the principal corridor which leads to the bottom zone used as laboratory (Figure 5).

Rome was at that time an important research center in the European scenery. However, the historical period did not determine its future fortune. The advent of Fascism played an im-

portant role, often manipulating the direction of the researches. At the same time, there were also, mostly isolated, scientific position of criticisms and opposition. It was a period rich in contradictions (Figure 6).

A museum in Rome (after 1950)

After Sergio Sergi, in 1953 the direction of the museum was assigned to Giuseppe Genna (1896-1988). Formed as medical surgeon, he had been first student of the Roman School and then director of the Anthropology Institute in Florence (from 1940 to 1953). He proceeded with morphological studies reflecting also on the human races thought. But foremost, he established and developed a research programme on hematologic markers, foreseeing their importance for the study of human variability and of microevolutionary phenomena (Messe-ri, 1988). Between the two world wars, physical anthropology

was encouraged to the registration and understanding of morphometric and serologic characteristics with the aim at determining the heterogeneity of human beings. Giuseppe Genna took part in several scientific expeditions, including the Middle East and Mexican ones. He was collaborator of Corrado Gini, eminent statistician and President of SIGE (Italian Society of Genetics and Eugenics) and of CISP (Italian Committee for the study of Population problems) (Cassata, 2006).

Later, Venerando Correnti (1909-1991) succeeded in the direction of both the museum and of the Institute of Anthropology. He was a medical surgeon, becoming independent lecturer in Anthropology in 1951 and Director of ISEF (Superior Institute of Physical Education). He invented the “malachistometro”, an anthropological tool used to measure soft tissues of human body. He contributed also to auxological studies for the improvement of the well-being of people (Cresta, Scano, 1992).

The following director of the institute and its museum was Massimo Cresta (1928-2003) and with him physical anthropology acquired a new impulse. He conducted alimentary statistical survey in Italy and abroad and they are worth to be recalled the one carried out at the Rofrano town (South of Italy), of which remains a suggestive documentary, and those in Benin, Africa. Cresta was also director of the School of Speciali-



Figure 5 - The space devoted to the museum in the Anthropology building of the new Studium Urbis as it was between 1938 and 1982. (Man@ur1 archive).

zation in Nutritional Science and he gave important indications with the purpose to stimulate agricultural producers to develop typical products.

Pietro Passarello (1932-) was the succeeding director of the museum and proceeded with the research programme embraced by the Roman School, particularly focusing on the morphological study of skeletal remains from Italian necropolises. Among other things, he focused his attention on the museum, with the aim at providing it a new organization and a better visibility. The first occasion was the “5 millions of years: hypothesis for a Science Museum” exhibition, taken in Rome at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, from 29 May to 31 July 1981. The exhibition was realized thanks to the co-works of the Mathematics, Physics and Natural Science faculty of “La Sapienza” with the Province, the regional district and RAI television. It was set up with the aim to sensitise the need of a Science Museum in Rome. For this exhibition, the Roman museum lent some of its most important casts of fossil hominids, including Saccopastore 1 and Saccopastore 2, original skeletons of monkeys and apes and several Palaeolithic artefacts (Passarello, Bietti, 1981).

Gabriella Spedini (1934-) came next Passarello. Woman of leading intellect, she proceeded with the research lines of the Italian Institute of Anthropology and in 1997 she published the first edition of her academic textbook *Evolutionary Anthropology*, largely used at universities for many years. Her studies on biochemistry components of blood and on hematologic characteristics are impressive.

Between December 1982 and January 1983, on the occasion of the exhibition “The humans from Saccopastore and their environment – Neanderthals in Latium”, some of the cabinets were moved to the bottom of the museum and the new area at the entrance of the museum was designed for the exhibition. A huge stained glass evocative of the Aniene river plain during prehistory, was used as divider for the new exhibition area from the one hosting the cabinets and their collections. The exhibition about the Saccopastore fossil specimens showed to the audience the origin and the evolution of the Neanderthals, focusing on the two precious remains, viewed in a descriptive palaeoecological frame (Ascenzi et al., 1983). Another exposition, organised by Massimo Cresta, Giovanni Destro-Bisol and Giorgio Manzi, was later realized with the title: “1893-1993:

one hundred years of Anthropology at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”. From Craniology to Evolutionary Biology”, from which today remain some exposition panels (Anzidei et al., 1993). In the end, in occasion of the 700 years of “La Sapienza”, the exhibition area was enriched with two wide panelling telling about, respectively, human evolution (titled “Our History”) and the history of Physical Anthropology at “La Sapienza” (titled “From the anthropologist to Anthropology”).

The Museum of Anthropology “Giuseppe Sergi” today

The research lines of anthropology followed by the directors of the museum and/or of the institute have been numerous and diversified. The early interest to the morphology and morphometry of contemporary humans was then shifted to the study of the human fossil record and to the one of the evolu-

tionary human history, passing throughout the races study of the period between the two world wars and throughout the serological analyses which carried to the modern molecular biology. The principal line of research of the current director Giorgio Manzi (formally curator of the museum since 1984 and then director since 2004), looks at the study of human evolution and at the prehistorical and ancient human skeletal population. From some decades, the museum is functionally divided in three principal areas (Manzi, 1985;

Passarello, Manzi, 1993), respectively devoted to: educational purposes (the exhibition one), conservation of the collections (the curatorial one), research and technical activities (the laboratory one). The entrance room hosts the permanent exhibition (Figure 7). The huge stained glass divides it from the zone used as area of conservation of the materials and, in the bottom, some space is dedicated to the study of skeletal remains, adapt to scientific and restoration laboratory. To this day, the exhibition room, of about 150 square meters, is divided into three sections. Each of them shows a different thematic itinerary. The first one, mainly through the exposition of fossil cranium casts, guides the visitor throughout the history of human evolution while, a second one, displays the history of physical anthropology in Rome, at the Sapienza, University of Rome. The central section of the room is used by the visitors to dynamically interact with the guide, who shows them the difference between humans and apes, challenging them to pro-

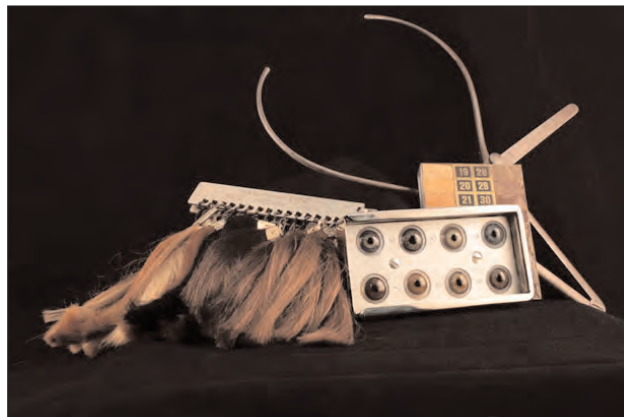


Figure 6 - Anthropological tools between '800 and '900; from right to left: hair, iris and skin colours panels, cephalometric compass. (MAN@ur1 archive; photo Costantino Buzi and Antonio Profico)

vide hypothesis and suggestions. The three sections collimate in an area dedicated to the reconstruction of the Middle Pleistocene site of Casal de' Pazzi, a paleontological site in the lower Aniene valley not far from Saccopastore (Figure 8). The reconstruction represents the focal point of the two themed itineraries, in conjunction with the interactive central section: it is intended as the experimental way to the access for the study of the extinct species but also as one of the heuristic applications of the old and new anthropology.

Around 6000 remains of early history and recent individuals are currently in the conservation area of the museum, together with the original Saccopastore fossils, around 600 gypsum face casts and busts, a collection of crania of primates and some ethnographic material, forming together an incredibly valuable collection of collections.

The museum has been recently renamed MAn@ur1, playing with the acronym of the words Museum of Anthropology and First University of Rome. The museum at the Sapienza represents only a case-study about Italian anthropology, but several other museums are present in Italy, each of them with a lot to tell, generally associated to Italian academic realities (Correnti and De Stefano, 1989). All of them are born from the study needs of their founders and the primitive cores of these museums were arrays of various materials collected throughout their research. Scientists and academics with various university educational background succeeded over time, contributing with new materials and with new research developments, resulting in that historical precious stratigraphy here already analysed. The first in Italy (and in Europe) was in Florence, funded in 1869 by Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), who was considered, together with Giuseppe Sergi, the pioneer of physical anthropology in Italy. As Giuseppe Sergi, Paolo Mantegazza was interested in

“everything is human” (Mantegazza, 1889; our translation) and he never neglected any human dimension. The second was the Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome, even if not properly “anthropological”. It was founded by Luigi Pigorini (1842-1925) in 1876, an eclectic archaeologist interested in the prehistory of Italian and Northern European populations, starting from the cluttered collection of antiquities and curiosities belonged to the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher. Later, in 1881, Giustiniano Nicolucci (1819-1904) founded

in Naples the anthropological museum from an incredible rich private collection of crania and prehistoric materials. From a medical and scientific background, he embraced the biological anthropology approach intended as *natural history of man*. Noteworthy is the Museum of Anthropology of the University in Bologna, founded in 1908 by Fabio Frassetto (1876-1953), who has previously been an assistant of Enrico Tedeschi in Padova and of Sergio Sergi in Rome for the Anthropology teaching. It is worth to be mentioned also the anthropological museum in Padua, devised by Enrico Tedeschi (1860-1931) in 1910. Enrico Tedeschi was philosopher and sociologist but, after he met Giuseppe Sergi, he moved forward the study of human aspects from a biological point of view. In 1898 was inaugurated the very characteristic Cesare Lombroso's Criminal Anthropological Museum in Turin, arose from the private Lombroso's collection. Cesare Lombroso had a wide scientific production, which surely caused heated debates but which also made him and his scientific activity internationally popular like few other anthropologists did. These museums arose, more or less, in the same historical period and their founders and protagonists largely shared the same cultural climate and scientific convictions. This is the reason why mostly of these museums have similar tracts, that are, for example, the presence of an itinerary on human evolution



Figure 7 - Entrance of the Museum “Giuseppe Sergi”. (MAn@ur1 archive; photo Ileana Micarelli)



Figure 8 - A guide with some young visitors describing the exhibit on excavations along the lower Aniene valley. (MAn@ur1 archive; photo Luca Bellucci)

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and collections of faces of the several human ethnic groups in the gypsum masks and/or in the busts collected by the explorers and the anthropologists of the racial anthropology. However, each museum has also its own exposition slant that makes it unique: for example, in the ones of Bologna and Naples it is possible to observe the development of the skeleton in its different growth phases, the sexual dimorphisms and the signs of some severe diseases; the museum of Bologna exhibits the face reconstruction of Dante Alighieri, hypothesised by Fabio Frassetto and other anthropologists (Giuseppe Sergi included) from the analysis of the cranial morphology; the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University in Turin hosts a curious collection of artistic artefacts made by the patients of a psychiatric hospital between the late XIX and the early XX centuries. Some other museums are rare jewels held in small towns and villages often erected on the areas of extraordinary paleoanthropological discoveries. For example, this is the case of the Prehistorical Museum of Pofi (FR), which not only holds the fossil cranium of Argil and other several fossils of animals found near the discovery site, but also displays a highlighted itinerary of the human evolution, under the supervision of its discoverer, Italo Biddittu.

Times are now mature to invest anthropological museums of a new visibility. Restoring them is now possible, but only clearly orienting their communicative message towards the respect of the ethnic groups, of the single visitor and of the historical narrative that goes along with them.

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